

The Stoic Emergency Kit

For those who need a refresher and those who are just starting out

by Massimo Pigliucci
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Cover: the Stoa at Aphrodisias (modern western Turkey), photo by the Author

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Introduction: Picking up Stoicism in a time of crisis

Stoicism is my chosen philosophy of life. Meaning that it provides me with a moral compass that guides me whenever I need to navigate the small and bigger problems that we inevitably encounter when dealing with others, when working, when loving. Pretty much when living.

I discovered Stoicism while muddling through a midlife crisis, after having left my religion (Roman Catholicism), and having understood that my previous choice, secular humanism, was simply not providing me with enough practical guidance and spiritual fulfillment.

I have written hundreds of articles and three books on Stoicism, but often people ask me for something basic, understandable, and practical. Hence this collection of nine essays culled from my Patreon site. They are meant as handy refreshers for people who have already been practicing this incredible philosophy, as well as for people who are just starting out and want to catch up quickly. Indeed, the impetus for this collection is the ongoing (at the time of writing) COVID-19 pandemic and the interest it has generated in Stoicism.

Stoic philosophy is not a panacea, nor is it a magic bullet. But it is an incredible source of wisdom and inner strength, and the more you study and practice it, the more it yields fruits. Give it a try, or get back into it. You will not regret it.

~Massimo Pigliucci

New York, March 2020

HISTORY

A very brief history of Stoicism

Stoicism was founded by Zeno of Citium (modern Cyprus) around 301 BCE, and it takes its name from the Stoa Poikile (painted porch), a public market in Athens when the Stoics met and engaged in philosophical discussions with anyone who was interested. A second major figure of the so-called “early Stoa” was Chrysippus, who is actually credited with elaborating most of the doctrines that are still associated with Stoicism. The early Stoics were of course influenced by previous philosophical schools and thinkers, in particular by Socrates and the Cynics, but also the Academics (followers of Plato) and the Skeptics.

The second period of Stoic history, referred to as the “middle Stoa,” saw the philosophy introduced to Rome. Cicero (not himself a Stoic, but sympathetic to the idea) is one of our major sources for both the early and the middle Stoa, since otherwise we have only fragments of the writings of the Stoics up to that point. The third and last period is referred to as the “late Stoa,” and it took place during Imperial Rome; it included the famous Stoics whose writings have been preserved in sizable parts: Gaius Musonius Rufus, Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius.

Once Christianity became the official Roman religion Stoicism declined, together with a number of other schools of thought (e.g., Epicureanism). The idea, however, survived in a number of historical figures who were influenced by it (even though they were sometimes critical of it), including some of the early Church Fathers, Boethius, Thomas Aquinas, Giordano Bruno, Thomas More, Erasmus, Montaigne, Francis Bacon, Descartes, Montesquieu, and Spinoza. Modern Existentialism and neo-orthodox Protestant theology have also been influenced by Stoicism. The philosophy is currently seeing a rebirth, and has deeply influenced modern practices such as logo-therapy and cognitive behavioral therapy. It also has a number of similarities and overlaps with modern philosophical approaches such as Buddhism and secular humanism.

Meet the Stoics

Zeno of Citium (c. 334 – c. 262 BCE) originated from Citium, currently Cyprus, possibly of Phoenician descent. Zeno was the original founder of the Stoic school of philosophy, which he taught in Athens from about 300 BCE. Based on the moral ideas of the Cynics, Stoicism laid great emphasis on goodness and peace of mind, gained from living a life of Virtue in accordance with Nature. It proved very successful, and flourished as the dominant philosophy from the Hellenistic period through to the Roman era.

Chrysippus of Soli (c. 279 – c. 206 BCE) was a Greek Stoic philosopher. He was a native of Soli, Cilicia, but moved to Athens as a young man, where he became a pupil of Cleanthes in the Stoic school. When Cleanthes died, around 230 BCE, Chrysippus became the third head of the school. A prolific writer, Chrysippus expanded the fundamental doctrines of Zeno of Citium, the founder of the school, which earned him the title of Second Founder of Stoicism.

Marcus Porcius Cato Uticensis (95 BCE, Rome – April 46 BCE, Utica), commonly known as Cato the Younger (Cato Minor) to distinguish him from his great-grandfather (Cato the Elder), was a politician and statesman in the late Roman Republic, and a follower of the Stoic philosophy. A noted orator, he is remembered for his stubbornness and tenacity (especially in his lengthy conflict with Julius Caesar), as well as his immunity to bribes, his moral integrity, and his famous distaste for the ubiquitous corruption of the period.

Porcia Catonis (c.70 BCE – June 43 BCE (or October 42 BCE)), Porcia “of Cato”, in full Porcia Catonis filia, “Porcia the daughter of Cato,” also known simply as Porcia, occasionally spelled “Portia” especially in 18th-century English literature, was a Roman woman who lived in the 1st century BCE. She was the daughter of Marcus Porcius Cato Uticensis and his first wife Atilia. She is best known for being the second wife of Marcus Junius Brutus, the most famous of Julius Caesar’s assassins, and for her suicide, reputedly by swallowing live coals.

Lucius Annaeus Seneca (often known simply as Seneca; c. 4 BCE – CE 65) was a Roman Stoic philosopher, statesman, dramatist, and in one work humorist, of the Silver Age of Latin literature. He was a tutor and later advisor to emperor Nero. While he was forced to commit suicide for alleged complicity in the Pisonian conspiracy to assassinate Nero, he may have been innocent. His father was Seneca the Elder, his elder brother was Lucius Junius Gallio Annaeanus, called Gallio in the Bible, and his nephew was the poet Lucan.

Gaius Musonius Rufus was a Roman Stoic philosopher of the 1st century CE. He taught philosophy in Rome during the reign of Nero, as consequence of which he was sent into exile in 65 CE, only returning to Rome under Galba. He was allowed to stay in Rome when Vespasian banished all the other philosophers from the city in 71 CE, although he was eventually banished anyway, only returning after Vespasian’s death. A collection of extracts from his lectures still survives. He is also remembered for being the teacher of Epictetus.

Epictetus (CE. c. 55 – 135) was a Greek Stoic philosopher. He was born a slave at Hierapolis, Phrygia (present day Pamukkale, Turkey), and lived in Rome until his banishment, when he went to Nicopolis in north-western Greece for the rest of his life. His teachings were written down and published by his pupil

Arrian in his Discourses. Epictetus taught that philosophy is a way of life and not just a theoretical discipline. To Epictetus, all external events are determined by fate, and are thus beyond our control; we should accept whatever happens calmly and dispassionately. However, individuals are responsible for their own actions, which they can examine and control through rigorous self-discipline.

Marcus Aurelius (Latin: Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Augustus; 26 April 121 – 17 March 180 CE) was Roman Emperor from 161 to 180. He ruled with Lucius Verus as co-emperor from 161 until Verus' death in 169. He was the last of the Five Good Emperors, and is also considered one of the most important Stoic philosophers. Marcus Aurelius' Stoic tome *Meditations*, written in Greek while on campaign between 170 and 180, is still revered as a literary monument to a philosophy of service and duty, describing how to find and preserve equanimity in the midst of conflict by following nature as a source of guidance and inspiration.

STOIC THEORY

Arête: on the nature of human excellence

Let's talk about arête, the Greek word often translated as "virtue." It was used by Socrates (and, of course, Plato), Aristotle, and pretty much all the Hellenistic schools, including Stoicism. The Stoics recognized four cardinal virtues (and a number of subordinate ones): practical wisdom, courage, justice, and temperance.

Plato's philosophical dictionary defines the cardinal virtues, in part, in this fashion (I have transcribed only the bits that are more in line with the Stoic version, the full definitions are longer and more varied):

Phronêsis (prudence, or practical wisdom): The ability which by itself is productive of human happiness; the knowledge of what is good and bad; the disposition by which we judge what is to be done and what is not to be done.

Dikaiosynê (justice, morality): The unanimity of the soul with itself, and the good discipline of the parts of the soul with respect to each other and concerning each other; the state that distributes to each person according to what is deserved; the state on account of which its possessor chooses what appears to him to be just; social equality.

Sôphrosynê (temperance, moderation): Moderation of the soul concerning the desires and pleasures that normally occur in it; harmony and good discipline in the soul in respect of normal pleasures and pains; rational agreement within the soul about what is admirable and contemptible; the state by which its possessor chooses and is cautious about what he should.

Andreia (fortitude, courage): The state of the soul which is unmoved by fear; self-restraint in the soul about what is fearful and terrible; boldness in obedience to wisdom; being intrepid in the face of death; force of fortitude in respect of virtue.

The problem is that translating arête as virtue is both misleading and too narrow. Just like translating eudaimonia as happiness, or even flourishing, is. My preferred rendering of that term is "the life worth living." Modern positive psychologists have actually given up on translating eudaimonia altogether, retaining the Greek term instead.

"Virtue," to the modern ear, has strong Christian overtones, which means that it sounds moralistic and directs the attention not to the sort of virtues mentioned above, but to Christian-like ones. Indeed, Thomas Aquinas took on board the four Stoic virtues, to which he added hope, faith, and charity (listed originally by Paul of Tarsus in the second letter to the Corinthians) to arrive at the seven canonical Christian virtues. Equally problematically, the term arête has a much wider meaning than the four cardinal virtues, even for the Stoics. And this is a point that, once elucidated, really brings Stoicism into sharp focus, revealing why it is such an enduring philosophy of life.

According to Freebase, "Arête, in its basic sense, means excellence of any kind. In its earliest appearance in Greek, this notion of excellence was ultimately bound up with the notion of the fulfillment of purpose or function: the act of living up to one's full potential. Sometimes translated as 'virtue,' the word actually means something closer to 'being the best you can be,' or 'reaching your highest human potential.' The

term from Homeric times onwards is not gender specific. Homer applies the term to both the Greek and Trojan heroes as well as major female figures, such as Penelope, the wife of the Greek hero, Odysseus. In the Homeric poems, *arête* is frequently associated with bravery, but more often, with effectiveness. The man or woman of *arête* is a person of the highest effectiveness; they use all their faculties: strength, bravery, wit, and deceptiveness [famously, in the case of Odysseus], to achieve real results. In the Homeric world, then, *arête* involves all of the abilities and potentialities available to humans. The concept implies a human-centered universe in which human actions are of paramount importance; the world is a place of conflict and difficulty, and human value and meaning is measured against individual effectiveness in the world.”

Given the above, you can begin to make much more sense of why the Stoics thought that a “virtuous” person, i.e., a person who is striving to be the best she could be, would excel not just at the moral virtues, but also at reasoning (logic, understood broadly as sound reasoning, therefore also becomes a virtue), as well as understanding the world (natural philosophy, or science, as we would call it today, is yet another virtue).

Which is why the Stoic curriculum involved the study of ethics (how to live one’s life), logic (the study of reasoning), and “physics” (the study of how the world works), as Diogenes Laertius reminds us:

[The Stoics] say that philosophical doctrine has three parts: the physical, the ethical, and the logical. ... These parts Apollodorus calls “topics”; Chrysippus and Eudromus call them “species”; others call them “genera.” They compare philosophy to an animal, likening logic to the bones and sinews, ethics to the fleshier parts, and physics to the soul. Or again, they liken it to an egg: the outer parts are logic, the next parts are ethics, and the inmost parts are physics; or to a fertile field, of which logic is the surrounding fence, ethics the fruit, and physics the land or the trees. ... No part is separate from another, as some of the Stoics say; instead, the parts are blended together. And they used to teach them in combination. (*Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* VII.39).

Striving toward excellence (*arête*) in the moral realm, in the realm of reasoning, and in that of natural philosophy, then, is what we should all do, precisely because the three are deeply interconnected: one cannot live a eudaimonic life if one doesn’t reason well, or is mistaken about how the world works. To limit “virtue” to the moral domain, as the Christians did, is reductive and brings about a fundamental misunderstanding of what human excellence is. Just imagine the benefits in modern times of taking seriously the notion that the very point of education is to give the tools to students to truly be the best they can be: ethical, well reasoning people, who have a good grasp of how the world works.

Perhaps we should follow the example set by positive psychologists, drop “virtue” entirely and just talk about *arête*. Regardless, we at least ought to be keenly aware of what that fundamental concept actually means, not just of Stoicism, but of all Greco-Roman philosophy.

Prosochē or not prosochē? On Stoic mindfulness

“Mindfulness” has been all the rage for some time now. And it has, predictably, been criticized on both philosophical and effectiveness grounds. But I’m not concerned with either here. It’s pretty clear to me that while different philosophical traditions that use mindfulness (e.g., Buddhism) do make philosophically questionable assumptions, those assumptions are specific to each tradition, and need to be evaluated case by case. It’s also clear that although the benefits often claimed for mindfulness are likely exaggerated, the word refers to a panoply of mental techniques that are useful for modest but important purposes, such as calming oneself, paying more attention to one’s thought processes, and so forth. So, I’m going to take it as a given that mindfulness refers to a number of different techniques, that are more or less effective, and that are more or less based on certain specific philosophical and metaphysical assumptions.

What I wish to explore here, instead, is a debate unfolding within the Stoic community about our version of “mindfulness.” Specifically, whether it is, in fact, something that the ancient Stoics did, and whether it should be incorporated in modern Stoic practices. The answers, I think, are practically relevant to anyone who is either practicing Stoicism already or is curious about the impact that adopting this ethical philosophy might have for their own lives.

The debate I’m referring to concerns whether the Stoic concept of “prosochē,” usually translated as “attention” or “mindfulness” is: (a) a truly central concept in ancient Stoicism, and (b) best understood as anything like what we mean today by mindfulness. I don’t have a particular stake in this discussion, and I’ve changed my mind about it already a couple of times. Indeed, a major reason to write this essay is rather selfish: I want to clear my own fog about this topic, as I sense that it is important.

While different authors of course have slightly different takes on prosochē, the two basic positions can be summarized in this fashion:

(I) Prosochē is a central aspect of Epictetus’ philosophy, and it is useful to translate the term as “mindfulness.”

(II) Prosochē is a minor aspect of Epictetus’ philosophy, and it is misguided to translate it as “mindfulness.”

Broadly speaking, on the side of (I) we have classic French scholar Pierre Hadot, “traditional” Stoic Chris Fisher, and author and cognitive behavioral therapist Don Robertson. On the side of (II) we have my friend Greg Lopez, co-author with me of *A Handbook for New Stoics: How to Thrive in a World Out of Your Control—52 Week-by-Week Lessons*. If we were to go by majority opinion, or by weight of published scholarship — and with all due respect to Greg — (I) would win hands down. But this is philosophy, and appeals to popularity or to authority are both informal logical fallacies, so we are not going to fall for that.

Yes, prosochē is a form of mindfulness

Let's start with the arguments put forth in defense of thesis (I). Fisher provides a good summary in his article, "Prosochē: Illuminating the Path of the Prokoptōn." He begins by citing Epictetus:

When you relax your attention for a while, do not fancy you will recover it whenever you please; but remember this, that because of your fault of today your affairs must necessarily be in a worse condition in future occasions. (Discourses IV.12.1)

"Attention" in the quote above is rendered in the original Greek as *prosochē*. Epictetus mentions the concept in other places as well:

Very little is needed for everything to be upset and ruined, only a slight lapse in reason. It's much easier for a mariner to wreck his ship than it is for him to keep it sailing safely; all he has to do is head a little more upwind and disaster is instantaneous. In fact, he does not have to do anything: a momentary loss of attention will produce the same result. (Discourses IV, 3.4-5)

Prosochē, then, claims Fisher, is crucial for the practice of the three disciplines of Epictetus: desire and aversion (meant to train us to redirect our desires and aversions toward that which is under our control), action (to guide us when dealing with other people), and assent (to improve our judgments). Notice that Greg and I built our entire book around the three disciplines (and, for that matter, I organized my previous book, *How to Be a Stoic*, also around them). So we don't disagree with Fisher that the three *topoi*, as they are often called, are crucial to the study and practice of Stoicism. Or at least, Epictetus' highly innovative version of Stoicism.

Fisher in turn was inspired by classicist Pierre Hadot, arguably the man who put Stoicism back onto the modern map of philosophies of life, particularly with three books, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, *The Inner Citadel*, and *What is Ancient Philosophy?* Here are a couple of choice quotes from Hadot, concerning *prosochē*:

A fundamental attitude of continuous attention, which means constant tension and consciousness, as well as vigilance exercised at every moment. (*What is Ancient Philosophy?*, p. 138)

Self-control... fundamentally being attentive to oneself... unrelaxing vigilance. (*Philosophy as a Way of Life*, p. 59)

Fisher also mentions Don Robertson, who has recently written an essay in defense of position (I), and who in his *The Philosophy of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy* defines *prosochē* as:

Attention to oneself which can also be translated as mindfulness or self-awareness. (p. 152)

How does *prosochē* work, exactly? According to Fisher, by constantly reminding the agent to pay attention to the here and now (*hic et nunc*), and specifically to the following three things:

Present representations — proper discernment of the impressions which press themselves on our psyche.

Present impulses — the desires and aversions which define our moral will (*prohairesis*).

Present actions — the present acts inspired by one's moral will. (Fisher, p. 3)

But it is precisely at this point in Fisher's essay (which is worth reading in its entirety) that trouble begins. He goes on to write (p. 3): "Vigilant focus on the present moment, often referred to as mindfulness, is most frequently associated with Buddhism in contemporary times. This is due primarily to the popularization of Eastern mindfulness practices in the West during later part of the twentieth century. However, as Donald Robertson suggests, the Buddhist concept of mindfulness 'bears comparison to certain European philosophical concepts.'"

No, *prosochē* is not really a form of mindfulness

Enter my friend Greg, who — unlike Fisher and Robertson (I think) — is not just a practicing Stoic, but a practicing Buddhist as well. And he is familiar with both the Stoic and the Buddhist literature. He wrote an essay for Modern Stoicism entitled "Sati & Prosoche: Buddhist vs. Stoic 'Mindfulness' Compared," where he defended thesis (II).

Greg's criticism of (I) is two-pronged: on the one hand, he claims that Stoic mindfulness, whatever it is, has little in common with Buddhist mindfulness (also, whatever it is, since there is quite a bit of disagreement on that too!). On the other hand, he suggests that the evidence in favor of a central role of *prosochē* in Epictetan philosophy, never mind in Stoicism in general, is pretty thin.

Let's start with what mindfulness means, in and out of Buddhism. Greg points out that the currently popular conception of mindfulness comes "from Jon Kabat-Zinn, the researcher behind Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). He defines mindfulness as 'paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.'" Right off the bat, then, this is not what Stoics are supposed to do. Epictetus tells us very clearly that we should judge our impressions, analyze them in detail, and then decide whether to assent to them or not. So, why Stoic *prosochē* is about paying attention (indeed, Greg points out that it is most often translated as "attention," not "mindfulness"), and it does act in the moment, it is most definitely not value neutral.

Greg continues by explaining that Kabat-Zinn's version of mindfulness may in turn have little to do with what early Buddhists practiced: "In Pali [an ancient language derived from Sanskrit], the word we translate as 'mindfulness' is *sati*. ... [Two similes from Buddhist tradition] seem to indicate that mindfulness can act as a kind of restraint on the mind and 'streams in the world.' Note that this is pretty different from 'mindfulness' as defined [by Kabat-Zinn]; there it seemed relatively passive. Here it's not." More specifically, *sati* is a practice of watching four objects of attention as they arise and pass in your consciousness. These areas are: the body, feelings, the functioning of the mind, and the qualities of the mind. The goal is for the agent to remain focused on those four areas, while at the same time setting aside concerns about externals.

Greg concludes: "The above seems to indicate to me that *sati* has many of the same qualities of mind that a student has when studying a subject they're engrossed in. This is indicated through the allusions to memory and knowledge mentioned several times. But instead of studying textbooks, the practitioner is studying their phenomenological experience. There is also a judgmental aspect of *sati* that is not present in Jon Kabat-Zinn's definition of a more modern form of mindfulness. ... One does not seem to simply

observe passively, but instead one takes note of what phenomena are helpful or hurtful, how they are so, and what makes them arise and cease. In short, *sati* seems to be the careful self-study of one's physical and mental experiences."

Which, again, is not really what *prosochē* is. Yes, the Stoic practitioner is supposed to focus her attention on her own mental (but not physical, body-related) experiences, and to arrive at judgments about them. But this is done with the explicit goal of training oneself to alter one's natural judgments of what is good and what is bad, transferring those labels from externals (like health, education, wealth, etc.) to internals (i.e., one's own judgments, considered opinions, endorsed values, and decisions to act).

As for the second point, that *prosochē* isn't that fundamental in Stoicism, Greg points out a couple of interesting things. First, there are quotes (e.g., *Meditations* I.16 and XI.16) where the word is not used in anything like what Hadot, Fisher and Robertson suggest. For instance: "Because of his own attentions, he rarely had need of a doctor's help, or medicines, or external treatment" (I.16). Here, "attention" — which is rendered by Marcus as *prosochē* — takes the normal, non-meditative meaning of the term. Marcus is just saying that we need to pay attention to things, in this case one's health. As Greg comments: "These instances of the use of 'prosochē' seem to indicate that the term has pretty straightforward translation into English: 'attention.' These examples do not seem to have any connotations of 'mindfulness' that we've seen thus far."

However, as Greg himself admits, we do find instances in Epictetus of a more mindfulness-like use of *prosochē*, particularly in *Discourses* IV.12, an entire section entitled "On attention." Here is a pertinent passage:

To what things should I pay attention, then? In the first place to those general principles that you should always have at hand, so as not to go to sleep, or get up, or drink or eat, or converse with others, without them, namely, that no one is master over another person's choice, and that it is in choice alone that our good and evil lie. ... And next, we must remember who we are, and what name we bear, and strive to direct our appropriate actions according to the demands of our social relationships, remembering what is the proper time to sing, the proper time to play, and in whose company, and what will be out of place, and how we may make sure that our companions don't despise us, and that we don't despise ourselves; when we should joke, and whom we should laugh at, and to what end we should associate with others, and with whom, and finally, how we should preserve our proper character when doing so. (IV.12)

This does, in fact, sound more like what Hadot & co. have in mind. Greg, however, has actually checked how many times the surviving Stoic texts use *prosochē*. Not many, as it turns out. It appears three times in the *Meditations*, ten times throughout the extensive writings of Seneca (in the Latin form, *animum advertere*, meaning "to turn the mind to"), and seven times in Epictetus.

While comparatively speaking this certainly does not constitute a high frequency of usage, I think Greg's argument needs to be taken with a grain of salt here. For one thing, other important concepts also make only an occasional appearance in Epictetus — for instance, the three *topoi* referred to above. And yet even Greg agrees that the three disciplines (another notion, incidentally, originally popularized by Pierre Hadot) are indeed crucial to Epictetean philosophy. Moreover, let us not forget that the estimate by

scholars is that close to 99% of Stoic writings has been lost. So statistical samples of the remaining 1% may not be as insightful as one might hope.

The flexibility of Stoicism, a qualified yes to *prosochē*

So, what are we to make about all of the above? I'm going to solomonically split the difference somewhere in the middle. I think Greg is right on both his main points: *prosochē* bears only a superficial resemblance to either sense of mindfulness in Buddhism (i.e., the ancient *sati* and the new Kabat-Zinn version). Also, it is true that the case for *prosochē* to be central in ancient Stoicism, or even just in the Epictetean variety, is at least questionable.

That said, I have no problem going with Hadot's suggestion and re-interpret Epictetus in a fashion that is both innovative and yet clearly bears a family resemblance to ancient Stoicism. Hadot already did that in the case of the three disciplines of desire/aversion, action, and assent. It is just as doubtful that they were as central for Epictetus as we tend to use them today. Then again, Epictetus himself was clearly an innovator within Stoicism (for instance, he greatly improved upon the middle Stoic Panaetius' theory of social roles). And let's not forget that Seneca famously said:

Will I not walk in the footsteps of my predecessors? I will indeed use the ancient road—but if I find another route that is more direct and has fewer ups and downs, I will stake out that one. Those who advanced these doctrines before us are not our masters but our guides. The truth lies open to all; it has not yet been taken over. Much is left also for those yet to come. (Letters, XXXIII.11)

Indeed, between the re-evaluation and re-articulation of the three disciplines and his push for a more central role for *prosochē*, Hadot becomes the first and one of the most important innovators in modern Stoicism, on par with Larry Becker.

To redeploy the concept of *prosochē* to mean paying attention to all our morally salient choices, as they are unfolding in the here and now, seems to me to be very useful. And while it's true that the best translation of *prosochē* is "attention," the word just doesn't convey the power of the concept as articulated by Epictetus. Since Buddhists don't have a monopoly on the term "mindfulness" (and they disagree among themselves on what it means), it seems fair to talk about Stoic mindfulness, particularly when the modifier "Stoic" is added to the phrase, to avoid confusion.

We are modern Stoics, we are inspired but not constrained by what the ancients wrote. Practicing the three disciplines of Epictetus with mindfulness is eminently reasonable and practical. So let's do it!

Stoic psychology 101: impressions, assent, and impulses

This is one of the most famous and important passages in all extant Stoic literature:

So make a practice at once of saying to every strong impression: ‘An impression is all you are, not the source of the impression.’ Then test and assess it with your criteria, but one primarily: ask, ‘Is this something that is, or is not, in my control?’ (Epictetus, *Enchiridion* 1.5)

If we understand this then we are already a long way toward understanding Stoic philosophy as a whole. And if we practice it regularly, we put ourselves on the path to *ataraxia*, a state of serenity that comes with always acting properly in the world.

So what on earth is Epictetus talking about? What is an “impression,” and how do we talk to it? To grasp this concept we need first to engage in a bit of Stoic Psychology 101. We are about to encounter some unfamiliar concepts and Greek words. But I guarantee you, the payoff is huge, so bear with me.

To begin with, let’s talk about emotions, or what the Stoics called “passions.” The classic book on this is Margaret Graver’s *Stoicism and Emotion*, about which you’ll find a nine-part commentary by yours truly at *How To Be a Stoic*. For our purposes here, we just need to know that the Stoics made a distinction between negative, or disruptive emotions (*pathē*), and positive, or constructive ones (*eupatheiai*). The way to understand their system is to appreciate that an emotion can be generated by the thought of something good or bad happening either now or in the future. These, then, are the four fundamental negative emotions:

Table of Stoic negative emotions (*pathē*)

	Present	Future
Good	pleasure (<i>hēdonē</i>), an impulse toward something present now that is considered good, but isn’t	appetite (<i>epithumia</i>), an impulse toward something in the future that is considered good, but isn’t
Bad	distress (<i>lupē</i>), an impulse away from something present now that is considered bad, but isn’t	fear (<i>phobos</i>), an impulse away from something in the future that is considered bad, but isn’t

As you can see, they are all about bad judgments. Before we proceed, please note that I will be using the key English words in the Stoic sense, which will be indicated from now on by the presence of scare quotes, in order to distinguish them from the modern, non technical meaning; that’s also why I’m bothering to write down the Greek words, to eliminate ambiguity altogether.

For instance, “pleasure,” may be the result of the misguided thought that it is good for me to stuff myself with food now that I’m having dinner, which is not true because I will later feel awful and put on some extra pounds.

“Distress” may be caused by the thought that my ongoing conversation with uncle Phil is painful and unpleasant, while in reality he is a smart guy who has something to teach me, if I bothered to listen.

“Appetite” might be generated by the thought that it would be good to have sex, in the near future, with that attractive married woman I just met, while in fact it would diminish both me and her as human beings.

Finally, I could experience “fear” at the prospect of having to go to a medical check up tomorrow, because I might discover that I have some sort of disease, while it’s actually good to get checked out regardless of whether one does or does not have a medical condition.

The same general scheme (with one exception, as we’ll see in a moment) can be used to understand the positive emotions:

Table of Stoic positive emotions (*eupatheiai*)

	Present	Future
Good	joy (<i>khara</i>), an impulse toward something present now that is considered good and is, in fact, good	reasonable wishing (<i>boulêsis</i>), an impulse towards some future thing regarded as good, which is, in fact, good
Bad	n/a (because the only present evil is bad judgment, which is under our control)	caution (<i>eulabeia</i>), an impulse away from some future thing regarded as bad which is, in fact, bad

“Joy” is the sort of thing I experience, say, in the presence of a gesture of friendship or love between two people I know.

“Reasonable wishing” is a desire for a good thing to happen in the future, like racial and gender justice in our society.

And “caution” is a rational tendency to shy away from things that are bad for me, such as arriving at mistaken judgments, or endorsing questionable values.

As you can see, “joy” is the opposite of “pleasure” (again, note the all important scare quotes!), “reasonable wishing” is the opposite of “appetite,” and “caution” is the opposite of “fear.” Moreover,

there is no positive opposite of “distress.” The reason is that this would have to be an impulse away from something present now that is considered bad and is, in fact, bad. This is impossible for the virtuous person, because the only present evil would be to respond unvirtuously to a given situation (externals themselves are never - for the Stoics - good or evil, they are morally indifferent to the agent). But it is always possible to respond virtuously, so the box is empty.

As a reminder, here is how Epictetus defines the dichotomy of control:

Some things are within our power, while others are not. Within our power are opinion, motivation, desire, aversion, and, in a word, whatever is of our own doing; not within our power are our body, our property, reputation, office, and, in a word, whatever is not of our own doing. (Enchiridion 1.1)

Armed with the above classifications, we can now move to the three concepts that will make clear the bit from Enchiridion 1.5 that we started with. The three concepts are:

Impressions (*phantasiai*, sing. *phantasia*), pre-cognitive judgments originating from our previous experiences or our subconscious thinking. For example: cats are nice, or cats are selfish; the square root of 9 is 3, or the square root of 9 is 4.

Assent (*sunkatathesis*), the confirmation, usually at a cognitive level, of the initial impression: cats are indeed selfish animals; the square root of 9 is indeed 3. (Obviously, one can deny assent to other impressions, like that cats are actually nice, or that the square root of 9 is 4.)

Impulse (*orgē*), a movement of the will toward action that we feel because of having assented to a given impression. Note that all the emotions we examined above, both negative and positive, are impulses.

In Stoic psychology, the causal chain connecting these three phenomena looks like this:

impression > assent > impulse

The impression, then, is involuntary. The assent, however, is the result of reflection (at least in individuals who are prone to reflect on things, otherwise it's implicit), and so the impulse is voluntary, the outcome of a specific combination of impression and assent. It is in this sense that the Stoics (and modern cognitive psychologists) hold that our emotions are voluntary, because they are the result of proto-emotions (involuntary) and cognitive (or implied) judgments.

Here are some examples brought up by Epictetus:

Provoked by the sight of a handsome man or a beautiful woman, you will discover within you the contrary power of self-restraint. Faced with pain, you will discover the power of endurance. If you are insulted, you will discover patience. In time, you will grow to be confident that there is not a single impression that you will not have the moral means to tolerate. (Enchiridion 10)

Let's take the specific case of an insult. A Stoically incorrect causal analysis of it would be:

impression: someone is insulting me
assent: it is awful to be insulted!
impulse: I experience “distress” (lupē)

What should a good Stoic practitioner do instead? This:

impression: someone is opening their mouth and moving air
deny assent: movement of air from someone’s mouth cannot hurt me
impulse: none, I just walk away

This, of course, is far easier said than done, which is why Epictetus warns his students:

If from the moment they get up in the morning they adhere to their ideals, eating and bathing like a person of integrity, putting their principles into practice in every situation they face – the way a runner does when he applies the principles of running, or a singer those of musicianship – that is where you will see true progress embodied, and find someone who has not wasted their time making the journey here from home. (Discourses I, 4.20)

Because after all:

If you didn’t learn these things in order to demonstrate them in practice, what did you learn them for? (Discourses I, 29.35)

Stoic epistemology 101: Zeno and the metaphor of the hand movement

If we don't understand, at least approximately, how the world works, we are likely to mislive our lives. This was a cardinal assumption of pretty much all the Hellenistic philosophies. The Cynics, the Cyrenaics, the Epicureans, the Skeptics, and the Stoics all thought that we should live "according to nature," though they cashed out that phrase in different ways. For the Epicureans, for instance, it was in accordance to nature to seek pleasure and, especially, to avoid pain. For the Stoics, following nature meant to take seriously the fact that we are social animals capable of reason. And so forth.

This approach to ethics (understood as the study of how to live one's life) has two interesting implications: first, a rejection of what in modern philosophy is known as the is/ought gap, famously described by David Hume:

In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remarked, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surprised to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, is, and is not, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an ought, or an ought not. This change is imperceptible; but is, however, of the last consequence. For as this ought, or ought not, expresses some new relation or affirmation, 'tis necessary that it should be observed and explained; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it. (Treatise of Human Nature, section 1, pp. 469-470)

But if you are building a naturalistic ethics, i.e., an ethics grounded in (though not uniquely constrained by) human nature, then there isn't any sharp distinction between facts and values. This isn't to say that facts rigidly determine values (I'm going to call this the Sam Harris fallacy), since there will often be more than one reasonable way to interpret any given set of facts. That's why the Stoics insisted that in order to arrive at a good ethics one ought to study both "physics" (i.e., science and metaphysics) and "logic" (i.e., everything that improves our thinking abilities, including cognitive science). So Hume is right when he says that a (philosophical) account has to be given every time one goes from facts to values. But he is wrong when he says that such an account is "inconceivable."

The second implication of "living according to nature" is that epistemology, i.e., a theory of knowledge, all of a sudden emerges as an important issue for all of us to consider, as opposed to a rather obscure and technical subfield of philosophy. If living a good life depends on reasoning correctly about the world, then we should be concerned with how, exactly, do we arrive at knowledge, or understanding (which are not necessarily the same thing), of that world.

The Stoics — like the Epicureans — thought that ultimately our knowledge of the world is grounded in our sensorial experience. But they also argued that sensorial experience by itself does not provide us knowledge. One needs to think correctly about what our senses are telling us, i.e., one has to arrive at right judgments about one's own sensorial experiences. Moreover, they thought that the highest level of understanding of the world requires not just correct judgment, but an understanding grounded into a general model of how the world works — essentially what we would term today a scientific model of the world.

Scott Rubarth wrote a very clear article on Stoic philosophy of mind for the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy that includes a discussion (in section 3) of the relevance of Stoic epistemology to Stoic psychology (and, in section 4, to Stoic ethics). Interested readers are strongly encouraged to check out Rubarth's essay, but here is how he puts the crucial point of concern for our present discussion:

Although we may entertain and experience all sorts of presentations [phantasiai], we do not necessarily accept or respond to them all. Hence the Stoics held that some phantasiai receive assent and some do not. Assent occurs when the mind accepts a phantasia as true. Assent is also a specifically human activity, that is, it assumes the power of reason. Although the truth value of a proposition is binary, true or false, there are various levels of recognizing truth. According to the Stoics, opinion (doxa) is a weak or false belief. The sage avoids opinions by withholding assent when conditions do not permit a clear and certain grasp of the truth of a matter. Some presentations experienced in perceptually ideal circumstances, however, are so clear and distinct that they could only come from a real object; these were said to be kataleptikê (fit to grasp). The kataleptic presentation compels assent by its very clarity and, according to some Stoics, represents the criterion for truth. The mental act of apprehending the truth in this way was called katalepsis which means having a firm epistemic grasp.

Okay, there is quite a bit of jargon here, but it's actually helpful. Let's try to clear things up a bit, I promise it will be worth it.

The impressions (or presentations, as Rubarth calls them) we get from our senses are phantasiai (the root of the English word phantasm, or ghost). They are the raw data of our understanding of the world, but do not constitute understanding by themselves.

Impressions usually come with a preliminary or implied judgment attached to them, which is weak, and sometimes (or often) false. This is what the Stoics referred to as "opinion" (doxa).

But impressions can (and should) be subjected to rational evaluation, to decide whether we should grant or deny assent to them. Even if we do, that does not guarantee that the impressions are thereby true. We may still, in good faith, give assent to false impressions (I'll give an amusing example in a minute).

A kataleptic impression is one of which the individual can be highly confident, because katalepsis is a special, high grade, kind of assent. It is so strong that we have a really hard time denying it (again, an example coming soon).

Finally, true knowledge requires the ability to fit the specific impression within the broader context of our understanding of the world, and is achievable by the sage, or by the sort of social epistemic effort we call science.

As always, the Stoics presented their complex ideas by way of metaphors. Zeno of Citium — the founder of Stoicism — proposed one based on different positions of one's hand (see top image, except for the last emoticon, which is close to, but not exactly what Zeno suggested):

Zeno professed to illustrate this by a piece of action; for when he stretched out his fingers, and showed the palm of his hand, 'Perception,' said he, 'is a thing like this.' Then, when he had a little closed his fingers, 'Assent is like this.' Afterwards, when he had completely closed his hand, and held forth his fist, that, he said, was comprehension. From which simile he also gave that state a name which it had not before, and called it κατάληψις [katalepsis]. But when he brought his left hand against his right, and with it took a firm and tight hold of his fist, knowledge, he said, was of that character; and that was what none but a wise man possessed. (Cicero, *Academica* II.XLVII)

So the sequence (compare with the hand gestures above) is:

raw impression (perception, including a preliminary judgment leading to opinion) > (reasoned) assent > kataleptic impression (comprehension, understanding) > knowledge

Let's ground all this in some examples, to bring the theory to bear on real life. Suppose I see an attractive woman (or man, depending on one's taste) walking across the street from me. My first impression (phantasia) is that she is lovely. My "opinion" (doxa), or preliminary judgment (which may be subconscious, and which is already bundled with the impression) is that it would be lovely to have sex with her. But then my rational faculties kick in and I do what Epictetus suggests we do with all impressions:

So make a practice at once of saying to every strong impression: 'An impression is all you are, not the source of the impression.' Then test and assess it with your criteria, but one primarily: ask, 'Is this something that is, or is not, in my control?' (Enchiridion 1.5)

As a result of this challenge to my own impression I decide that no, it would most definitely not be good to have sex with the woman, for a variety of reasons, ranging from the fact that I think that casual sex is demeaning (it uses others as means to my own ends) to the even more relevant fact that I'm about to get married to a woman I love and would never do anything to jeopardize that relationship.

But I had to work on my initial impression in order to arrive at my conclusion. Which means the impression itself was not kataleptic, it didn't present itself to me as obviously true (or false). An example of a kataleptic impression is again given by Epictetus:

For what reason do we give our assent to something? Because it appears to us to be the case. If something appears not to be the case, it is impossible for us to give our assent. And why so? Because that is the nature of our mind, that it should agree to things that are true, not accept things that are false, and suspend its judgement with regard to things that are uncertain. What is the proof of that? 'Form the impression, if you can, that it is night at present.' That is impossible. 'Put aside the impression that it is day.' That is impossible. So whenever anyone assents to what is false, one may be sure that he does not willingly give his assent to falsehood ('for every mind is deprived of the truth against its will', as Plato observes), but rather that what is false seemed to him to be true. (Discourses, I.28.1-5)

Epictetus is making two points here: first, he is providing us with an instance of a kataleptic impression: if you have the impression that it is day outside, that impression strikes you with such force that it is

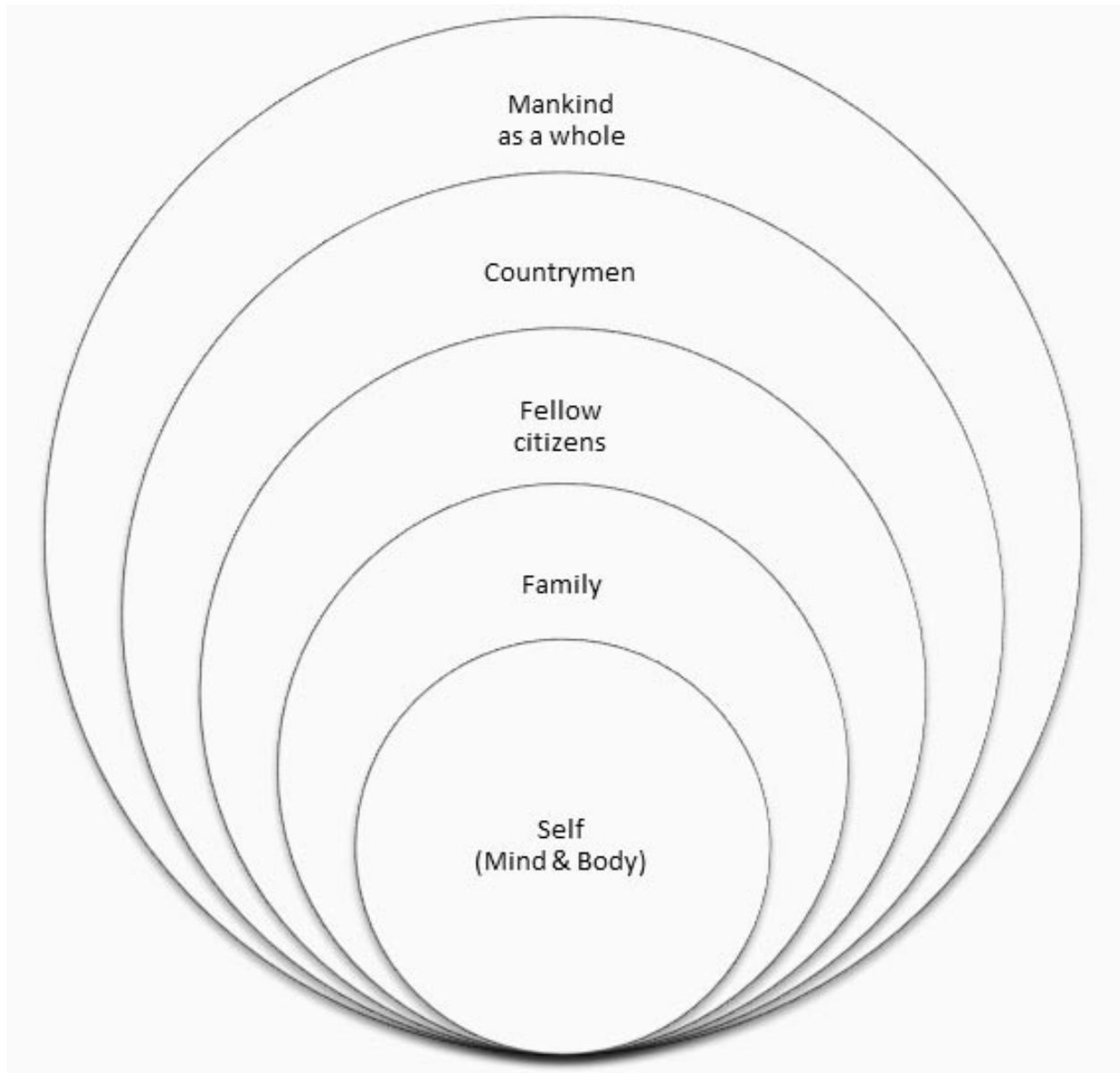
undeniable. (Yes, yes, you could be hallucinating, or an evil neuroscientist may be playing tricks on you, or you could be a brain in a vat. But, seriously, setting aside increasingly bizarre and uninformative thought experiments in philosophy of mind, you get the point, right?)

Second, he uses that example to reiterate Plato's original point that nobody assents to falsehood on purpose (remember that assenting to something means to be rationally convinced of that something, of course one can pretend for all sorts of instrumental reasons to accept a notion she knows is not actually correct). Plato, and the Stoics, use that conclusion to establish their concept of *amathia*, the notion that nobody does evil on purpose. But that's another story.

There is a lovely (though likely apocryphal) story that reminds us of just how difficult it is to actually be confident in one's impressions, even if they appear to be *kataleptic*. The Stoic Sphaerus was once the guest of the king, and he was discoursing about impressions, opinions, and *katalepsis*. The king offered him a plate featuring some lovely looking pomegranates. Sphaerus reached out for the fruit, only to find out that it was made of wax. The king laughed and asked the philosopher how come he had assented to the wrong impression. Without skipping a bit, Sphaerus replied that he only assented to the impression that the fruit looked deliciously edible, not that it actually was. Clever, but the king had indeed made his point.

A better answer would have been for Sphaerus to reply that he never claimed to be a sage, and only sages — according to the Stoics — have true knowledge. The best the rest of us can do is to be aware of the distinctions illustrated by Zeno's analogy of the end movements, and constantly try to heed Epictetus' advice to engage our impressions in critical questioning.

Oikeiôsis: how to feel at home in the world



One of the fundamental principle of Stoicism is cosmopolitanism: humanity is one big city of beings capable of reason, in virtue of which we should treat everyone justly, i.e., with fairness and respect. This principle of action is derived from what the Stoics thought is a natural principle, which was incorporated into stoic philosophy from the beginning, with the writings of Zeno of Citium: *oikeiôsis*.

The term is translated in a variety of ways, including “appropriation,” “familiarization” and “endearment,” but what is most revealing is the Greek root: *oikos* means household or family, and is the same root of the modern terms ecology and economics (indeed, one of the leading journals in ecology is

named Oikos). The best way to understand the notion, then, is that oikeiôsis is a process by which we come to perceive something as our own, as belonging to us.

Those who followed Zeno stated that oikeiôsis is the beginning of justice. (Porphyry, quoted in Richter, p. 75)

But what, exactly, does the natural process consist of, and why do the Stoics derive from it what amounts to a moral duty?

The most famous Stoic associated with the theory is Hierocles, who flourished in the second century (not to be confused with the fifth century Neo-Platonist Hierocles of Alexandria). We don't know much about him, though Aulus Gellius mentions that he was a contemporary of his, and that he was a "grave and holy man." Hierocles wrote about oikeiôsis in at least two books, *Elements of Ethics* and *On Appropriate Acts*, of which we only have fragments.

Hierocles begins his account of oikeiôsis by noting that animals are characterized from the moment of birth by an instinct of self-preservation, which extends to humans. This sense of "belonging to itself" depends on our perception of the external world as distinct from our own inner feelings. As Hierocles puts it in *Fragments and Excerpts*: "An animal, when it has received the first perception of itself, immediately becomes its own and familiar to itself and to its constitution."

This self-perception is the basis of the animal's (and the human infant's) sense of self-preservation, understood simply as an instinct to seek things that augment one's own wellbeing and to stay away from things that might undermine it.

As the human animal grows up, though, it becomes familiar with other people surrounding it, especially its own caregivers, like parents or other close relatives. Gradually, and naturally, oikeiôsis then leads us to extend our concern to the wellbeing of those people. When we reach the age of reason, around 7 to 8 years old, and continuously thereafter, we begin to apply our reflective thinking to further extend the process, realizing that other people, who are not related or otherwise close to us, are essentially like us, with similar wants, needs, worries, and so forth.

The wise person, extrapolating the process of oikeiôsis to its logical outer limit, would then feel "at home" not just with relatives, friends, and fellow townspeople, but with humanity at large. Here is Hierocles' famous passage explaining the idea (see top image for a visual rendition):

Each of us is, as it were, circumscribed by many circles; some of which are less, but others larger, and some comprehend, but others are comprehended, according to the different and unequal habitudes with respect to each other. For the first, indeed, and most proximate circle is that which everyone describes about his own mind as a centre, in which circle the body, and whatever is assumed for the sake of the body, are comprehended ... The second from this, and which is at a greater distance from the centre, but comprehends the first circle, is that in which parents, brothers, wife, and children are arranged. The third circle from the centre is that which contains uncles and aunts, grandfathers and grandmothers, and the children of brothers and sisters ... Next to this is that which contains the common people, then that which comprehends those of the same

tribe, afterwards that which contains the citizens; and then two other circles follow, one being the circle of those that dwell in the vicinity of the city, and the other, of those of the same province. But the outermost and greatest circle, and which comprehends all the other circles, is that of the whole human race ... It is the province of him who strives to conduct himself properly in each of these connections to collect, in a certain respect, the circles, as it were, to one centre, and always to endeavour earnestly to transfer himself from the comprehending circles to the several particulars which they comprehend. It is requisite, likewise, to add a proper measure conformably to the general use of appellations, calling indeed cousins, uncles and aunts, by the name of brothers, fathers and mothers; but of other kindred, to denominate some uncles, others the children of brothers or sisters, and others cousins, according to the difference of age, for the sake of the abundant extension which there is in names. For this mode of appellation will be no obscure indication of our sedulous attention to each of these relatives; and at the same time will incite, and extend us in a greater degree, to the contraction as it were of the above mentioned circles. (Fragments, How we ought to conduct ourselves towards our kindred)

Hierocles here first describes the concentric circles, beginning with one's self in the center (not because we are more important than others, but because we have a special relation to ourselves), followed by relatives, friends, acquaintances, other people, and so forth. The largest circle, you'll notice, is that of the human race.

(Some modern Stoics add additional circles, to include all sentient animals, that is, all animals capable of suffering. This would be unorthodox in ancient Stoicism, since the crucial criterion was a capacity for rationality, but I agree with what Jeremy Bentham wrote in this regard: "The question is not, 'Can they reason?' nor, 'Can they talk?' but 'Can they suffer?')"

So far the descriptive part. Hierocles then shifts into prescriptive mode: if we "strive to conduct ourselves properly" we should attempt to "collect" the external circles, bringing them closer to the internal ones. That is, we should train ourselves to care more about strangers on the other side of the world, as if they were fellow citizens; and to care more for our fellow citizens, as if they were friends; and to care more for our friends, as if they were family; and to care more for our family, as if they were us.

The final bit even provides some advice on how to do this in practice, an approach that is actually in use in a number of cultures: start referring to people you don't know as brothers or sisters, uncles or aunts (depending, says Hierocles, on what's appropriate to their age), to constantly remind yourself that you should treat them as if they really were relatives. This is an early example of cognitive behavioral therapy, if you will: the first step is cognitive (reflect on the issue, and realize that you should care about other people), the second one behavioral (implement strategies that will gradually habituate you to feel the way you think you should).

You might have noticed that Hierocles has seamlessly shifted from an "is" (i.e., a factual description of things) to an "ought" (i.e., an ethical prescription). This, according to many modern moral philosopher, has been a no-no ever since David Hume wrote these famous words in his *A Treatise of Human Nature*, back in 1739:

In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remarked, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surprised to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, is, and is not, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an ought, or an ought not. This change is imperceptible; but is, however, of the last consequence. For as this ought, or ought not, expresses some new relation or affirmation, 'tis necessary that it should be observed and explained; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it. But as authors do not commonly use this precaution, I shall presume to recommend it to the readers; and am persuaded, that this small attention would subvert all the vulgar systems of morality, and let us see, that the distinction of vice and virtue is not founded merely on the relations of objects, nor is perceived by reason.

It is actually debatable whether Hume here meant that the is/ought gap is unbridgeable or, more modestly (and likely, in my opinion) that if we do bridge it then we ought to provide reasons for our specific approach. Be that as it may, the ancients - and particularly the Stoics - would have been puzzled by the whole notion of a sharp qualitative distinction between facts and values. Cicero writes that “all duties derive from principles of nature,” and Hierocles’ theory considers “appropriate acts” those that are in “accordance to nature.”

I hasten to say that neither Cicero nor the Stoics nor any other ancient philosopher were such simpletons as to commit the fallacy of appeal to nature, i.e., equating everything natural with the good. For instance, for the Stoics to work together to improve society is “in accordance to nature,” because we are social animals. But anger is also a natural human reaction, and yet the Stoics, and Seneca in particular, wrote abundantly about why anger is bad for us.

How do we separate natural/bad from natural/good, then? By exercising the highest faculty that nature itself has given us: reason. In fact, to live according to nature, for the Stoics, simply meant to exercise reason in order to improve the human cosmopolis. And it is precisely the natural process of *oikeiôsis*, which begins at the level of instinct and is then expanded by the application of reason, that allows us to feel at home in the world.

STOIC PRACTICE

Stoicism in three simple steps

Stoicism is a philosophy of life, no different in that respect from a religion. True, Epictetus was not a god, and the Enchiridion is not Scripture. But all religions come with the same two fundamental components that characterize any philosophy of life: a metaphysics, that is, an account of how the world hangs together; and an ethics, that is, an account of how we should live in the world — given the way it hangs together. The major difference between Stoicism and an actual religion, say Christianity, is that Stoics feel free to keep updating and reinterpreting the ancient texts, and that the respective metaphysical axioms are different: naturalism and universal cause-effect for the Stoics, supernaturalism and a creator God for Christians.

Now, one can study and practice Christianity at different levels. They can be one of the flock, just attending mass, developing an understanding of the basic precepts of the religion, and try to live accordingly. Other people devote their life to it, for instance priests and nuns. Still others pursue a sophisticated understanding of the theory behind the practice, as is the case of theologians. Some teach it, most don't.

The same goes with Stoicism. One can be a proficiens, as Seneca calls those who make progress, on the basis of a minimalist take on the theory and a focus on the practice. Or one can write books and teach seminars. Or be interested in the details of how to reconcile Stoic physics with modern science, say. If you are even superficially familiar with this site, or with my books, then you know where I fall in that continuum. But even after years of study and practice, I find it refreshing from time to time to go back to the basics, an exercise that I hope can also be helpful to those of you who are just starting, or who have little interest in the intricacies of Chrysippean logic (see Enchiridion 49).

So here are three easy steps to understand and practice Stoic philosophy:

- (i) Always behave with the interest of the human cosmopolis in mind.
- (ii) Some things are up to you, many are not up to you. Focus on the former, and accept the latter as they come.
- (iii) In everything you do, ask yourself: is this wise? Courageous? Just? Temperate?

That's it! Follow these three steps and you will become a proficiens, not to mention a better human being. Now, for those of you who are a bit more inquisitive about where the above comes from, let us break it down further.

(i) Behave as a good member of the human cosmopolis

Do as Socrates did, never replying to the question of where he was from with, 'I am Athenian,' or 'I am from Corinth,' but always, 'I am a citizen of the world.' (Epictetus, Discourses I, 9.1)

The Stoics were cosmopolitan, striving to think of fellow human beings as members of their own family, a practice known as "oikeiosis," or appropriation of other people's concerns. In a sense, using reason —

which the Stoics thought is the highest of human faculties — in order to improve social living is the whole point of Stoic philosophy. The reason for this is that the Stoics cashed out the famous injunction to “live according to nature” (common to most Hellenistic schools) in terms of their specific conception of human nature. They concluded that the two characteristics that, combined, distinguish human beings from any other living species on earth are that we are eminently social and that we are capable of reason. So to live according to nature for a human being translates into using our reasoning ability to make the cosmopolis a better place for everyone. We do, of course, have other duties, to our family, friends, and local community. These are articulated in Stoicism by way of Epictetus’ role ethics, described in detail by my friend and colleague Brian Johnson. But Epictetus is clear: the role that trumps them all is that of a member of the cosmopolis.

(ii) Some things are up to you, many are not up to you

Some things are within our power, while others are not. Within our power are opinion, motivation, desire, aversion, and, in a word, whatever is of our own doing; not within our power are our body, our property, reputation, office, and, in a word, whatever is not of our own doing. (Epictetus, *Enchiridion* 1)

This is what is known in modern Stoic circles as the dichotomy of control, though the term unfortunately easily leads to confusion. People tend to object to the notion that we have complete control of our opinions (the first part of Epictetus’ quote), and also that we don’t have control over material things such as our bodies (second part of the quote). But the idea is actually simpler and at the same time more powerful: other people can indeed influence your opinions and judgments, just as you can influence your body, reputation, and so forth. But, ultimately, the buck stops with you when it comes to your own deliberations, while it stops with others when it comes to externals. No matter how much other people influence your opinions, they are nevertheless yours, and you are responsible for them. Conversely, no matter how hard you work to, say, keep your body healthy, it will ultimately succumb to disease or accident. In modern terms, it is most useful, I think, to regard the dichotomy of control as an invitation to shift goals from outcomes to efforts, that is, from external to internal. What is up to you is to make sound decisions and to work at whatever you set as a goal for yourself; what is not (entirely) up to you is to actually achieve that goal. Hence engage in anything you do by accompanying it with a reserve clause: I will do it, if I am not precluded by external factors.

(iii) The four cardinal virtues

Amongst the virtues some are primary, some are subordinate to these. The following are the primary: wisdom, courage, justice, temperance. (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives and Opinions of the Eminent Philosophers*, VII.92)

The four primary, or cardinal virtues, can be used as a kind of ethical compass to navigate life. In anything we do, we may profitably ask ourselves if we are acting virtuously, and in particular whether we are being wise, courageous, just, and temperate. Temperance, of course, is the notion that we should be doing things in proper measure, neither too much, nor too little. Justice is the idea that we ought to treat others as fellow members of the cosmopolis, with fairness and respect. Courage is the idea that if we determine that a particular action is just, then we ought to actually implement it, even at a personal cost.

Wisdom, or to be precise, practical wisdom (in Greek *phronesis*, often translated as prudence, from the Latin *prudentia*), is the tricky one. It is usually cashed out as knowledge of what is truly good and truly bad for us. In the case of the Stoics, this — by way of the dichotomy of control — reduces to the simple to grasp, yet exceedingly difficult to practice, notion that the only good things for us are our good judgments, and the only bad things for us are our bad judgments. Everything else is (morally) “indifferent,” either preferred or dispreferred.

This, in a nutshell, is Stoicism! Of course there is a lot more to be said in terms of theory, and far more to consider when it comes to practice. But if you begin your day by remembering the three steps above, and then try to consistently implement them at every occasion, you will be on your way to become one of Epictetus’ best students.

How I practice Stoicism: 9 easy exercises

Stoicism is a practical philosophy. Which means that, although there is a theory behind it (otherwise, it wouldn't be a philosophy!), the most important part is how you do it. I am often asked exactly what it means "to be" a Stoic, or, more specifically, how I personally practice. Below is a list of the exercises I regularly engage in, each with an accompanying quote from a Stoic source and a brief commentary about how to operationalize the idea. For many more exercises (52, in fact), see the forthcoming "A Handbook for New Stoics: How to Thrive in a World Out of Your Control—52 Week-by-Week Lessons," which I co-wrote with my friend Greg Lopez.

Daily exercises

1. Reflection on Stoic passages

The wise man, indeed, overcomes Fortune by his virtue, but many who profess wisdom are sometimes frightened by the most unsubstantial threats. And at this stage it is a mistake on our part to make the same demands upon the wise man and upon the learner. I still exhort myself to do that which I recommend; but my exhortations are not yet followed. And even if this were the case, I should not have these principles so ready for practice, or so well trained, that they would rush to my assistance in every crisis. Just as wool takes up certain colours at once, while there are others which it will not absorb unless it is soaked and steeped in them many times; so other systems of doctrine can be immediately applied by men's minds after once being accepted, but this system of which I speak, unless it has gone deep and has sunk in for a long time, and has not merely coloured but thoroughly permeated the soul, does not fulfill any of its promises. (Seneca, Letters to Lucilius 71.30-33)

Here Seneca is telling us that we need to constantly bring to mind the principles of our philosophy, in order to, gradually, over time, internalize them and make them second nature to us. One way to do this is to start your day (though this can be done at any convenient quiet moment) by reading a passage from one of the Stoic sources and reflecting on how it applies to our lives. You may, of course, come up with your own list of favorite passages, but I publish an almost daily Stoic meditation precisely for that purpose.

2. Table temperance

Mastering one's appetites for food and drink is the beginning of and basis for self-control. (Musonius Rufus, Lectures 18A.1)

Temperance is one of the four cardinal virtues, and as Musonius reminds us, we have at least three easy occasions to practice it daily: every time we sit at the table and eat or drink. That's what I mindfully try to do at mealtime. It's not just good for your soul, it's good for your health as well!

3. Philosophical diary

Admit not sleep into your tender eyelids till you have reckoned up each deed of the day--How have I erred, what done or left undone? So start, and so review your acts, and then for vile deeds chide yourself, for good be glad. (Epictetus, Discourses III, 10)

I do my philosophical diary in the evening, before going to bed, though again, any moment of quiet will do. It doesn't have to be done every day, actually, and in fact I tend to write in it whenever the need arises, usually several times a week. I use a word processor on my laptop, making sure to protect the file with a password (I mean, I ain't no Marcus Aurelius, I don't really need future generations to look at these very personal thoughts...). The template provided by Epictetus works, though there is another one given by Seneca (in *On Anger*, III.36). Or you can come up with your own. The point is to reflect on what you have done that is ethically salient, learn from your mistakes, appreciate what you have done right, and make a mental note to try as much as possible to move away from the first category and toward the second one.

Weekly exercises

4. Self-deprivation

Now there are two kinds of [Stoic] training, one which is appropriate for the soul alone, and the other which is common to both soul and body. We use the training common to both when we discipline ourselves to cold, heat, thirst, hunger, meager rations, hard beds, avoidance of pleasures, and patience under suffering. For by these things and others like them the body is strengthened and becomes capable of enduring hardship, sturdy and ready for any task; the soul too is strengthened since it is trained for courage by patience under hardship and for self-control by abstinence from pleasures. (Musonius Rufus, Lectures 6)

These are typically understood as mild exercises in self-deprivation, so don't go crazy! The idea is, just as Musonius says, to strengthen our character by voluntarily renouncing certain pleasures or conveniences. The ones I do regularly are: fasting for at least 24 hours, abstaining from drinking alcohol at least one day a week, taking occasional cold showers (or ending a regular shower on cold), and going out under-dressed when there are low temperatures outside. Many more variations are possible. Another reason to do these exercises is to rekindle your gratitude and appreciation for what you normally have but take for granted.

5. I didn't know there were so many things I do not need

How far happier is he who is indebted to no man for anything except for what he can deprive himself of with the greatest ease! Since we, however, have not such strength of mind as this, we ought at any rate to diminish the extent of our property, in order to be less exposed to the assaults of fortune: those men whose bodies can be within the shelter of their armour, are more fitted for war than those whose huge size everywhere extends beyond it, and exposes them to wounds: the best amount of property to have is that which is enough to keep us from poverty, and which yet is not far removed from it. (Seneca, *On Tranquillity of Mind* 8)

The notion here is to leave as little as possible in the hands of Fortuna, which means to rely less on external goods, such as property and money. In this case too, there is no need to go to extremes: just be mindful of everything you buy and ask yourself if you really need it. Sometimes I begin a week by

deciding that I will not buy anything except basic necessities for seven days. The title of the exercise comes from a phrase attributed to Socrates, who one day walked throughout the Agora -- the Athenian market -- got to the other side without buying anything, and said "I did not know there were so many things I do not need." In this era of consumerism and one-click purchases, this is good both for your soul and your wallet!

Occasional exercises

6. Premeditatio malorum

If an evil has been pondered beforehand, the blow is gentle when it comes. To the fool, however, and to him who trusts in fortune, each event as it arrives 'comes in a new and sudden form,' and a large part of evil, to the inexperienced, consists in its novelty. This is proved by the fact that men endure with greater courage, when they have once become accustomed to them, the things which they had at first regarded as hardships. Hence, the wise man accustoms himself to coming trouble, lightening by long reflection the evils which others lighten by long endurance. We sometimes hear the inexperienced say: 'I knew that this was in store for me.' But the wise man knows that all things are in store for him. Whatever happens, he says: 'I knew it.' (Seneca, Letters to Lucilius 76.34-35)

"Premeditatio malorum" literally means premeditation of evil, and it can be done in a number of ways. Some modern practitioners do it as a visualization exercise akin to those recommended in cognitive behavioral therapy (a clinical approach that is, in fact, inspired by Stoicism). I am not good at visualization exercises, so I have developed a method that uses the widespread technique, in educational circles, of concept mapping. (See essay on this topic later on in this collection.)

7. View from above

The agitations that beset you are superfluous, and depend wholly upon judgments of your own. You can get rid of them, and in so doing will indeed live at large, by embracing the whole universe in your view and comprehending all eternity and imagining the swiftness of change in each particular, seeing how brief is the passage from birth to dissolution, birth with its unfathomable before, dissolution with its infinite hereafter. (Marcus Aurelius, Meditations 9.32)

Here and elsewhere Marcus invites us to take a bit of distance from our daily affairs, stresses, and preoccupations. By purposefully embracing a long view, either in terms of time or in terms of space, we will be able to put things in perspective, realizing that what seem like serious problems on the spur of the moment are but a blip in the general scheme of things. This one too can be done as a visualization exercise (here is a video to help), or as a writing exercise.

8. Sunrise meditation

The Pythagoreans bid us in the morning look to the heavens that we may be reminded of those bodies that continually do the same things and in the same manner perform their work, and also

be reminded of their purity and nudity. For there is no veil over a star. (Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, XI.27)

Nothing like reconnecting with Nature for a philosophical practitioner that identifies with a school whose motto was "live according to Nature"! To do this exercise, I make sure the weather forecast is good for the following morning, set up my alarm for an hour before sunrise, get dressed quickly, grab a cup of coffee on the go, and walk to a spot from which I get a reasonably unimpeded view of the Sun rising above the horizon (not easy in New York City...). Then I wait until the celestial ball of fire is completely visible, reflecting on our relationship to the cosmos, and the majestic beauty of the latter. Bonus: having started the day so early, I get a lot more done!

9. Meditation on death

No man can have a peaceful life who thinks too much about lengthening it. ... Rehearse this thought every day, that you may be able to depart from life contentedly; for many men clutch and cling to life, even as those who are carried down a rushing stream clutch and cling to briers and sharp rocks. (Seneca, Letters to Lucilius 4.4-5)

We are mortal. It's a fact of life, and an inevitable one at that. So let us focus on living life here and now, and not be afraid of death since -- as the Epicureans used to say -- wherever she is we are not (and vice versa). One way to meditate on our own mortality and help take the sting out of the thought of it is to visit a cemetery, walking around looking at names and dates, all the while thinking that we will soon join that group of no-longer beings. This may seem depressing, but I assure you I always get out of it more energized and resolved than before to live every day to the fullest!

How to deal with insults, the Stoic way

Remember that it is we who torment, we who make difficulties for ourselves — that is, our opinions do. What, for instance, does it mean to be insulted? Stand by a rock and insult it, and what have you accomplished? If someone responds to insult like a rock, what has the abuser gained with his invective? (Discourses I, 25.28-29)

There has been a lively discussion of late, in Stoic circles, about insults and how to deal with them. A discussion, I believe, that has implications far outside of Stoic philosophy, affecting pretty much anyone who has ever felt insulted at some point or another in their life. Which means almost every human being who ever lived.

The quote above from Epictetus makes it crystal clear what the Stoic advice is concerning insults: ignore them. This is a direct consequence of the fundamental Epictetean notion that there is a sharp distinction between facts and opinions. Facts are objective descriptions of things or events. Opinions are value judgments about those things or events. Facts are independent of the existence of human minds, opinions are generated exclusively by human minds.

For example: a few days ago someone told me on social media that I am a mediocre academic who wrote a piece critical of a famous female colleague out of spite and a sense of inferiority. (This is the piece, in case you were wondering.) Ouch. The utterance was clearly meant as a put down, and therefore a good candidate as an insult. So let's parse it carefully, with a particular eye toward separating facts from values, à la Epictetus.

One fact is that someone did write those things on social media. A second fact is that they were directed at me, personally, since the guy used my handle for that particular social platform. A third fact is that I am an academic. Am I a mediocre one? While "mediocre" can be a subjective value judgment, it can also be interpreted factually. In this second sense, by the objective standards of the academy I am certainly less famous and accomplished than the colleague I had criticized. But I am an Endowed Professor (that's an actual title) at a good public university. That probably puts me above mediocrity, though definitely not into the stellar category. Did I write the piece out of spite and a sense of inferiority? Well, my introspection says no, but of course introspection is notoriously unreliable. Certainly, though, my social media interlocutor could not possibly know my motivations or inner thought processes, so that part of his statement is not factual, it's just a guess on his part.

Now for the value component. Did the guy insult me? That was, apparently, his intention. Did I feel insulted? Not in the least, since I feel secure in both my motivations for writing the original piece and the soundness of my arguments. Besides, if my arguments turned out to be incorrect, then the rational thing to do would be for me to correct them, not to feel insulted. So did I decide not to respond, to behave like a rock, as Epictetus suggests? No. I took a second Epictetean route, exemplified by the following quote:

If you learn that someone is speaking ill of you, don't try to defend yourself against the rumors; respond instead with, 'Yes, and he doesn't know the half of it, because he could have said more.' (Enchiridion 33.9)

So I tried out a bit of self-detracting humor myself. It was a fun exercise. There was no response from the other guy, and we both moved on to more pressing matters in our lives.

In general, though, I prefer the rock-approach, on the ground that it is (a) easier to implement (you literally have to do nothing, instead of racking your brain in order to come up with some clever retort), and (b) does not lend itself to misunderstandings (self-deprecating humor often borders into, or is perceived as, sarcasm, which is not a constructive response to anything).

With this background in mind, what, exactly, are my Stoic colleagues disagreeing about? The discussion has involved Bill Irvine, author of *A Guide to the Good Life: The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy* and, most recently, of *The Stoic Challenge: A Philosopher's Guide to Becoming Tougher, Calmer, and More Resilient*; Eric O. Scott, who blogs for Euthyphrora; and Don Robertson, author of *Stoicism and the Art of Happiness* and, most recently, of *How to Think Like a Roman Emperor: The Stoic Philosophy of Marcus Aurelius*.

Briefly, here are their respective positions. Bill argues (here) that as Stoics we should not react to insults, just as Epictetus suggests. This applies, he says, also to the sort of high-profile on-campus situations that have recently made the rounds in the news, such as micro-aggressions, safe spaces, and trigger warnings. Moreover, according to Bill, the world would be a better place if more people took up the Stoic attitude toward insults, because insults generate anger, and anger wastes a lot of our time and emotional energy (and leads to violence and even war; in other words, it's a really bad idea).

Eric wrote a response to Bill (here, with Bill's counter-response here), arguing that there is a danger in reacting to insults as rocks: we may underestimate or ignore structural injustices that need to be addressed, essentially turning Stoicism into a quietist philosophy. If a black person, say, or a woman, simply ignore racist or sexist comments directed at them, this could easily devolve into disregarding not just the insult, but the pernicious culture that generated it.

Don (here) strikes a nice balance between the two positions, reminding us that the issue is complicated. On the one hand, some people have developed legitimate and entrenched emotional reactions as a result of continued exposure to, say, racist or sexist comments. On the other hand, it is clear from the Stoic writings themselves (and from the actions of a number of Stoic practitioners) that Stoicism is very much concerned with social justice (see here), and is most definitely not a quietist philosophy.

I have simplified the opinions of all three of my friends in order to keep this essay within reasonable limits and still add a few notes of my own to the debate, but interested readers should definitely follow all four of the above links and see for themselves what Bill, Eric, and Don have been arguing about.

In addition to what has already been said, I'd like to make two points that may help us moving forward, one about the distinction between Stoic practitioners and non-Stoic practitioners, the other concerning the distinction between personal behavior and social action.

I. Stoics and non-Stoics

Don Robertson actually touched on this in his own commentary, but it is worth fleshing it out into a major point: it is one thing to advise yourself and other Stoic practitioners; it is an altogether different thing to advise people who don't follow Stoic philosophy. Epictetus himself makes the distinction very clear, and suggests how we should behave in the two cases:

When you see anyone weeping for grief, either that his son has gone abroad or that he has suffered in his affairs, take care not to be overcome by the apparent evil, but discriminate and be ready to say, 'What hurts this man is not this occurrence itself — for another man might not be hurt by it — but the view he chooses to take of it.' As far as conversation goes, however, do not disdain to accommodate yourself to him and, if need be, to groan with him. Take heed, however, not to groan inwardly, too. (Enchiridion 16)

The first point here is that for Stoics the only true evils are our own bad judgments, and the only true goods are our own good judgments. This is a direct consequence of the dichotomy of control, the notion that what is “up to us,” as Epictetus says in Enchiridion 1, are only our considered opinions, endorsed values, and decisions to act. Everything else, including the outcome of our actions, may be influenced by us, but is ultimately outside of our (complete) control, since they are affected by external factors.

But of course most other people, meaning people who do not practice Stoicism, don't see it that way. For them the categories of good and evil include a lot of other things, most of which are not under their control. A Stoic would say that that is why they are not happy, because they stake their happiness on things that are not up to them. Be that as it may, they don't buy into Stoic axioms, and therefore it makes no sense, and it is indeed callous, to tell them, essentially, “bad Stoic,” and Stoisplane to them how they should act. (I just created the neologism Stoisplaining, in analogy with the well known mansplaining. So there.) Hence Epictetus dual advice to his students: if you are in the company of non-Stoics, behave in a way that is comforting to them. But remember that you don't share their take on things, and so you shouldn't “groan inwardly.”

To be fair, when Bill presented his controversial talk at Stoicon in New York he was addressing an audience of Stoic practitioners, or of people interested in Stoicism. So he was in a position similar to Epictetus talking to his students, which means it was perfectly acceptable for him to advise them to follow the Stoic path. Of course even a member of the audience at Stoicon may reject any particular advice, regardless of how well grounded in Stoic philosophy it may be. But the speaker cannot reasonably be criticized for proving such advice.

II. Personal behavior vs social action

The second thing that is crucially important to keep in mind in this debate is the very clear philosophical distinction between personal behavior and social action. This distinction is foundational in Stoicism, since the philosophy is one of both self-improvement (we attempt to become excellent human beings) and social improvement (the Stoic eudaimonic life is one in which we use reason to make a better human cosmopolis).

Of course the two aspects clearly inform each other: to become an excellent human being just means to use reason to the best of our abilities in order to improve social living. And vice versa, to work toward the

betterment of the human cosmopolis is to become more virtuous as individuals. But these two aspects are nevertheless logically distinct from each other, and there is a danger to confuse them, so that one then puzzles about how is it possible to focus on what is under one's control and at the same time not slide into an inevitably quietist philosophy.

Here is how, in the specific case of insults. As far as we — Stoic proficientes (those who make progress, to use Seneca's term) — are concerned, insults are nothing to be disturbed by. The intentions and utterances of other people are outside of our control, but our reaction to such utterances is very much under our control, and the best way to handle insults is the one that Epictetus counsels: behave like a stone would. Period.

However, according to Epictetus' role ethics, the most important role in our lives is that of members of the human cosmopolis. Which means that we need to work, as much as it is within our possibilities, to bring about a world in which social injustice does not exist. Which includes the elimination of racism, sexism, and a lot of other pernicious "isms" that have affected humankind for millennia.

If you put the two together, you actually get a beautifully harmonious balance between not giving a crap about insults at the personal level, while at the same time working hard so that the injustices underlying the most egregious kinds of insults will be eradicated from human experience. Both are lofty goals, the first one being realized only by the sage, the second one only by a community of sages. But those remain nonetheless our goals as students of Stoicism. So let's get back to work, shall we?

Let's talk about the premeditation of adversity

Premeditatio malorum is Latin for premeditation of adversity, one of the most well known, potentially misunderstood, and very useful of all Stoic techniques. It seems, therefore, like clarifying its scope and use would be a good idea.

In this essay I'm going to do the following: (i) present the concept of premeditatio in modern Stoicism and its roots in ancient Stoicism, as treated by two leading contemporary authors, Don Robertson and Bill Irvine; (ii) discuss a potential tension between the premeditatio and the Stoic advice of focusing on the here and now, ignoring both past and present on the ground that they are not under our control; and (iii) introduce a new way (so far as I know) of actually carrying out the premeditatio, using the technique of concept mapping.

I.1. Don Robertson's treatment of premeditatio

Don writes extensively about the premeditation of adversity in his *Stoicism and the Art of Happiness*, particularly in chapter 7 (of the 2013 edition, there is a new edition dated 2018). He begins by quoting Epictetus:

Keep before your eyes day by day death and exile, and everything that seems catastrophic, but most of all death; and then you will never have any abject thought, nor will you crave anything excessively. (Enchiridion, 21)

Don explains that the term comes from Seneca, although unfortunately he does not cite an exact reference (a quick search of my Delphi Complete Works of Seneca did not turn out anything, including from the Latin text). He immediately clarifies an important point, though: while Irvine (see below) calls this technique “negative visualization,” we should keep in mind that for the Stoics external events are not really bad, but (morally) indifferent. Indeed, according to Seneca we should pre-meditate not just about adversity, but also about good fortune, since we will need our virtue (and a prepared mind) to deal with both:

Hold fast to this thought, and grip it close: yield not to adversity; trust not to prosperity; keep before your eyes the full scope of Fortune's power, as if she would surely do whatever is in her power to do. That which has been long expected comes more gently. (Letters LXXVIII.29)

I would add, and I know that Don would agree, that in the context of ancient Stoicism we shouldn't refer to it as a “visualization,” as there is no hint in the literature that that's what they meant. Seneca and Epictetus talk about “keeping in mind” the possibility of adversity, but “visualization” has a modern ring, with a closer connection to cognitive behavioral therapy (see below) than Stoicism per se.

Here is Seneca again:

It is in times of security that the spirit should be preparing itself to deal with difficult times; while fortune is bestowing favours on it then is the time for it to be strengthened against her rebuffs. In the midst of peace, the soldier carries out manoeuvres, throws up earthworks against a non-

existent enemy and tires himself out with unnecessary toil in order to be equal to it when it is necessary. If you want a man to keep his head when the crisis comes, you must give him some training before it comes. (Letters XVIII.6)

And Marcus:

Say to yourself at daybreak: I shall come across the meddling busy-body, the ungrateful, the overbearing, the treacherous, the envious, and the antisocial. All this has befallen them because they cannot tell good from evil. (Meditations, II.1)

Interestingly, Don also mentions Michael Foucault (a modern philosopher not usually associated with Stoicism) as discussing in detail the *premeditatio*, and describing it as consisting of three components (p. 152):

1. Rather than imagining the most likely future, the Stoic practises imagining the worst-case scenario, even if it's unlikely to actually happen.
2. The Stoic pictures the feared scenario as if happening now, rather than in the future, e.g., not that she will one day be exiled but that she is in exile already.
3. The primary rationale is for her to rehearse freedom from irrational distress (*apatheia*), by calmly persuading herself that these external 'misfortunes' are really indifferent, to be accepted as merely situations calling on us to exhibit virtue and strength of character.

Don, who is a CBT practitioner, makes a direct link between the *premeditatio* and modern techniques, in particular exposure therapy, which is based on a process of habituation to whatever stimulus causes anxiety. He suggests that Stoic premeditation is similar to imaginal exposure, which is the most common strategy in CBT that exploits mental imagery to address anxiety.

Interestingly, in CBT, the notion -- often held by a patient -- that a particular anticipated event is awful is challenged by asking questions like "so what, if it happens, is it going to be the end of the world?" The goal is to "de-catastrophize," as Albert Ellis, the founder of rational emotive behavior therapy (a precursor of CBT) put it, by shifting the focus on the development of coping plans aimed at handling the problematic situation.

Again, Seneca:

Since it is invariably unfamiliarity that makes a thing more formidable than it really is, this habit of continual reflection will ensure that no form of adversity finds you a complete beginner. (Letters, CVII.4)

I.2 Bill Irvine's treatment of *premeditatio*

Bill's discussion of the *premeditatio* in chapter 4 of *A Guide to the Good Life: The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy* actually predates Don's, but it deviates in a number of respects from Stoicism proper (as do other

aspects of his book, for instance his attempt to turn the dichotomy of control into a trichotomy, rightly criticized by Don as destroying Stoicism).

Bill too begins by quoting Seneca:

He robs present ills of their power who has perceived their coming beforehand. (To Marcia, IX.5)

Bill, somewhat surprisingly, connects the premeditatio to the phenomenon of hedonic adaptation studied by psychologists Shane Frederick and George Loewenstein. Consider someone who wins the lottery. Initially, the event is greeted with exhilaration, but then people -- studies show -- quickly adapt to the new situation, returning to their previous, more or less “set” point of happiness. Bill, correctly, claims that a key to long lasting happiness is to forestall the process of hedonic adaptation, by acting in a way that prevents us from taking certain things, like hot showers and warm meals, for granted.

This, however, seems to me to have to do more with self-deprivation exercises than with the premeditatio. Consider Seneca:

Set aside a certain number of days, during which you shall be content with the scantiest and cheapest fare, with coarse and rough dress, saying to yourself the while: ‘Is this the condition that I feared?’ (Letters XVIII.5)

and:

I hold it essential, therefore, to do as I have told you in a letter that great men have often done: to reserve a few days in which we may prepare ourselves for real poverty by means of fancied poverty. (Letters XX.13)

Even Bill quotes this passage:

We should love all of our dear ones ... but always with the thought that we have no promise that we may keep them forever—nay, no promise even that we may keep them for long. (Seneca, To Marcia, IX.2, X.3)

which is not really about premeditating adversity in the sense described in the previous section, that is, in order to be mentally prepared when things go wrong (compare Meditations II.1 above), but is instead an exercise in gratitude and an invitation to focus on the here and now.

Bill goes further afield when he mentions that, if we have trouble visualizing adversity, perhaps it will be easier if we remind ourselves of other people’s adversity, reflecting on the fact that those things could just as easily happen to us. While there is textual evidence for this approach, again it doesn’t really seem to be about preparing oneself for a bad turn of events, but more a way to keep things in perspective and not complain that the universe is after us, specifically. Consider this, from Epictetus:

When somebody's wife or child dies, to a man we all routinely say, 'Well, that's part of life.' But if one of our own family is involved, then right away it's 'Poor, poor me!' We would do better to remember how we react when a similar loss afflicts others. (Enchiridion 26)

Bill, however, is correct when he stresses that there is a difference between contemplating adversity and worrying about it. Contemplation, he continues, is an exercise in detachment, while worrying is an emotional state. I will return to this distinction later.

He also refers to the contemplation of the impermanence of things in the world ("panta rhei," would say Heraclitus), as in several passages in the Meditations, for instance:

Perhaps the desire of the thing called fame torments you. See how soon everything is forgotten, and look at the chaos of infinite time on each side of the present, and the emptiness of applause, and the fickleness and lack of judgment in those who pretend to give praise, and the narrowness of its domain, and be quiet at last. (Meditations IV.3)

But this is again a different exercise, with a different scope, another way to gain perspective and remind ourselves why our apparently mighty struggles are but a moment in time and a speck of dust in space. Not really the same thing, or purpose, as the premeditatio.

II. Why premeditate, if we should focus on the here and now?

But wait a minute, you may have been thinking all along. Isn't there a bit of a tension between the notion of premeditating about adversity (or, more broadly, as Seneca suggests in Letters LXXVIII.29, any delivery from Fortuna, positive or negative) and the oft-repeated Stoic advice to focus on the here and now, ignoring both the past and the present on the ground that they are not under our control?

Will you not understand that no man should be tormented by the future? ... Souls that enjoy being sick and that seize upon excuses for sorrow are saddened by events long past and effaced from the records. Past and future are both absent; we feel neither of them. But there can be no pain except as the result of what you feel. (Seneca, Letters LXXIV.34)

And again:

Two elements must therefore be rooted out once for all – the fear of future suffering, and the recollection of past suffering; since the latter no longer concerns me, and the former concerns me not yet. (Letters LXXVIII.14)

I don't think there is a contradiction here. Let me explain by way of analogy with another Stoic technique, the evening philosophical diary. Seneca explains how to do it in some detail:

The spirit ought to be brought up for examination daily. It was the custom of Sextius when the day was over, and he had betaken himself to rest, to inquire of his spirit: "What bad habit of yours have you cured to-day? What vice have you checked? In what respect are you better?" ... I make use of this privilege, and daily plead my cause before myself. ... I pass the whole day in review

before myself, and repeat all that I have said and done: I conceal nothing from myself, and omit nothing: for why should I be afraid of any of my shortcomings, when it is in my power to say, 'I pardon you this time: see that you never do that anymore?' (On Anger, III.36)

This may appear to be in direct contradiction with the two quotes from Seneca's Letters reported just above, which clearly state that we should not concern ourselves with the past, since it is no longer under our control. But here the obvious, and correct, interpretation is the one given by Irvine above: there is a difference between contemplating adversity and worrying about it. And this goes for both the past and the future.

The idea is that it is irrational to worry about either past or future because, again, they are outside of our control. But it is perfectly rational to contemplate both past and future. In the first case so that we may learn from our own mistakes, in the second case so that we may prepare ourselves mentally for whatever Fortuna is about to hand to us.

III. Concept mapping as a way to do premeditatio

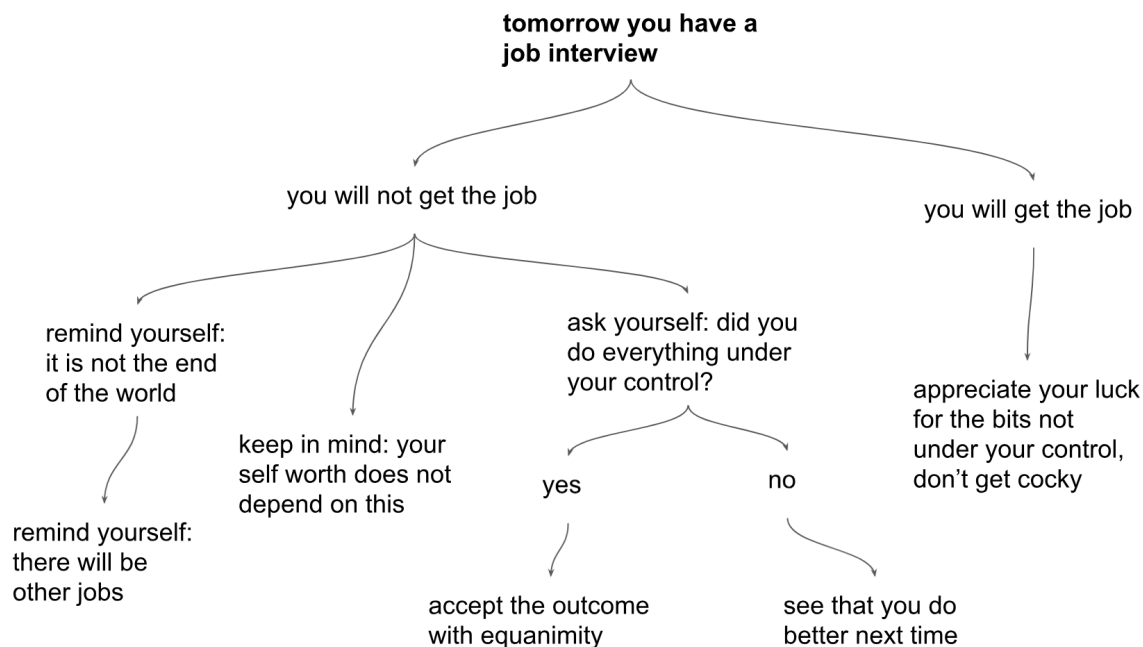
From what we've seen so far, the ancient Stoics thought of the premeditatio as an exercise in rational contemplation (Seneca: think of what may happen, so that you will be prepared when it does happen), or in philosophical writing (a lot of Marcus' Meditations). Modern Stoics, taking a cue from cognitive behavioral therapy, do the premeditation as a visualization exercise, essentially running a movie in one's mind that plays out the likely scenario, over and over until one is habituated to it and anxiety diminishes. I'm not that good at visualization exercises, so instead I make heavy use of the technique of the philosophical diary for the premeditatio (though, as I pointed out above, the diary is useful for more than just the premeditation of adversity, since it should be used also to learn from one's past and generally to reflect on one's progress).

Recently, however, I have adapted a well known pedagogical technique known as concept mapping to the premeditatio. C-mapping is a very powerful and flexible tool that allows us to organize our thoughts on a particular topic. It is used in teaching from the elementary to the graduate school level, since being able to build a good concept map is a quick check on whether one has really understood the major ideas expressed in, say, a book or essay, as well as how these ideas are connected.

Below is a simple example of premeditation of adversity done by concept mapping:

The specific (hypothetical) example is that of someone facing a job interview the following day. As you can see, the map begins with the two possible outcomes: either I get the job or I don't. (Notice that the text is phrased in the second person, just as Marcus wrote the Meditations. There is evidence from modern psychological research that this helps making the self-analysis more detached and objective.)

If I get the job, then I should be grateful to Fortuna (i.e., the randomness of the universe) because a number of factors I do not control happened to go my way. It's a reminder that I shouldn't get too cocky and overestimate what is in my control.



If I don't get the job, a number of things follow. First (extreme left side of the diagram) I should remind myself that this isn't the end of the world. In rational emotive behavior therapy terms, I need to "de-catastrophize." And of course, there will (likely) be other chances for me to get a similar job. Or a different one.

Second, I should keep in mind that my self worth does not depend on having gotten that particular job (or any other one). Jobs are preferred indifferents, meaning that they do have value (we all need to pay our bills!) but do not, per se, make us better or worse persons, the only thing that matters in Stoic philosophy. Third (central part of the diagram), I should ask myself whether I did everything that was in my power in order to prepare for the interview. If the answer is no, then I need to do better next time around. If yes, then I need to remind myself that things in life don't always go my way, even when we I everything right, and that I need to cultivate an attitude of equanimity toward adverse outcomes, in order to keep my serenity (what Epictetus calls our "harmony with the universe").

The point of the exercise is that the very act of carefully mapping out the possible outcomes and how we should react to them is helpful in calming down and preparing our mind for what is going to happen. The map shown here is a relatively simple example, and it can be made more complex by adding as many layers of details as one feels necessary. Concept maps can be created with simple presentation software (here I used Google Slides, but Apple Keynote, or MS PowerPoint would do as well), or by using special software like the one linked to a few paragraphs above.

Happy premeditatio, everyone!



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